

Geo-Strategic Dimensions of India's Foreign Policy

Zafar Alam (Dr)

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science and International Relations, College of Social Sciences, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Abstract: *The present study "geo- strategic dimensions of India's foreign policy" gives a specific understanding of India's place on the earth focusing on its strengths and shortcomings from the geo-strategic point of view as a nation. Himalayas and oceans were considered as natural formidable barriers from the security point of view for India once upon a time but the developments in science and technology have changed the meanings of security. Location, size, population, natural resources and many other related aspects have been highlighted in this study, whereas a histo-analytical approach has been used while writing this research paper and predominantly, a comparative study has been also undertaken into account by giving a glimpse of international perspectives particularly of those nations regarded to be having a stronger foreign policy and enjoying a lot of privileges because of their geo-strategic positions.*

Keywords: Tibet, Kashmir, geography, strategic, India, China.

1. Introduction

The focal point of each and every international activity conducted by a state is expected to enhance the best image of the nation to achieve the maximum possible benefits and reputation among the global community. Thus interactions among the states, bilateral, trilateral or multilateral whatever is the nature it must be systematic and based on certain well defined principles to achieve the specific objectives or desired goals. That national goal is provided by a nation's foreign policy by using different mechanisms or diplomacies including negotiations, dialogues and even sometimes war etc. While determining their principles the states are required to work within the limits of their strengths and realities of the internal and external environment. Keeping in mind such limitations and realities, statesmen and diplomats hardly can dare to go against the prevailing domestic and global situation that impose limitations upon their planning and, to a considerable extent, predetermine their course of action. In fact, foreign policy of any nation is determined by so many factors, some of them are relatively stable than others and be regarded more basic and unchangeable determinants of foreign policy. It does not mean that other factors are not considerable and have no importance during the formulation of foreign policy of any nation, because foreign policy is never determined by one factor or set of factors, but it is the result of interplay of a large number of factors which affect foreign policy in different ways in different circumstances.¹

Geographical and strategic position of a nation is one of the most important factors in international politics. For example, strategic condition of Israel -very close to Africa, Asia and Europe- compels the Western powers to have an amiable relationship with farmer and many analysts even account the establishment of Israel in the region as to influence the Middle East full of liquid wealth and the Suez Canal which provides a shortest sea route linking Asia Africa and Europe. With this geo-strategic understanding and background an attempt has been made to highlight the India's place in international politics, more specifically: (a) How should India behave with the international community to maximize the national interest and (b) What should be the proper place of India among the nations of the world, how and why?

2. Geography

Geography is the first and foremost object comes into the considerations and intentions of the diplomats while analyzing the strengths or the weakness of a nation, which reflects its significance in the process of foreign Policy formulation. The size and location of the territory, accessibility and character of the frontiers, climate and population, natural resources, capacity of industrial production and transportation facilities are some key issues and forceful features while deciding a place internationally for any state. Great nations acquired much of their powers because geographic location afforded them a dominant strategic position, access to sea lanes or intercontinental transport routes and control over vital natural resources. Inevitably, nations with such advantages found themselves endowed with influence of more than local character, provided their internal conditions permitted an intelligent and orderly organization for the exploitation of such privileges. Hence the chief concern of policy makers for the physical geography of countries extends primarily to large powers rather than to small or middle nations, except where strategic considerations focus special attention on a particular area. Generally, smaller countries no larger lead an entirely independent political life. They must eventually, decide with which group of nations, that is under what type of leadership they will wish to combine forces.²

However, it is very clear on account of geography that many countries of the world are getting scores of privileges by their size, location, climate, natural resources and by other geographical factors. While analyzing geographical impact in case of India, one can find geography as one of the most important determinants of her foreign policy, shaping her attitudes towards other countries. A country of continental size, she covers an area of 3.27 million sq. kms. She has something like 3500 of coastal frontier and 8200 miles of land frontier. Few regions of the world have such perfect boundaries as the Indian subcontinent. The Indian subcontinent separated from the rest of Asia by formidable natural barriers in all directions constitutes a distinct geographical region in cultural, economic and political terms. India is sheltered by the Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea, in the East, South and West and the grand Himalayas in the North.³

With these frontiers there is a bulk of countries which are located, more or less, at Indian borders, as its borders touching China, Nepal and an erstwhile Russian Republic in the north: in the west land frontiers meet Pakistan and beyond that exists Afghanistan. In the south India has Sri Lanka and in south-east India has been having cordial relations with Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam and other nations. It has Bangladesh and Myanmar (Burma) as its neighbors in the east. So far as South-East Asian Countries are concerned, India has not only blood relations with them but also the bond of common customs and culture which are still similar to each other.⁴

3. Location

Location of a country, from the strategic point of view, is a big deciding factor of her fate. The history of international relations shows that location has always been an important determinant of the foreign relations of a state. The strategic location of Britain has helped her to rule over the waves both in terms of trade and naval power. The geographical position of U.S.A. helped her in the past to follow an isolationist foreign policy under the Monroe Doctrine: But it has also made her vitally interested in the security of Western Europe which is her first line of defense. The location of Japan has helped her to become one of the leading trading and ship building nations of the world. The unique geographical location of the two halves of Pakistan had resulted in a built in insecurity in the state structure and foreign policy of the state in the past.⁵

From the point of view of location of a country as the determinant of foreign policy, in the case of India, location has played a vital role in shaping its foreign policy: Indian's position is strategic and no power of the world can ignore her. Nehru had said in 1949 that:

Look at the map. If you have to consider any question affecting the Middle East, India inevitably comes into the picture. If you have to consider any question concerning South-East Asia, you cannot do so without India. So is also with the Far-East. While the Middle-East may not be directly connected with South East Asia, both are connected with India. Even if you think in terms of regional organizations in India, you have to keep in touch with the other regions. And whatever region you have in mind, the importance of India cannot be ignored.

India is the gateway of both south-East Asia and the Middle East. India's security and vital interests are closely tied with the future of the region. Nehru had also stated that:

*India becomes a kind of meeting ground for various trends and forces and a meeting ground between what may be roughly called the East and the West.*⁷

India is situated in South Asia; its northern borders are generally protected to some extent by the mighty Himalayas. It has a vast sea cost on three sides. This factor cannot be ignored in foreign policy making. India's coastline is vital for its foreign Policy. Indian Ocean was used as a route for

penetration into India during 17th-19th centuries by the French, British, Dutch and the Portuguese. Most of the Foreign Trade of India goes through the Indian Ocean. Any Foreign domination of the Indian Ocean is injurious to the national interest of this country. The defense of the vast sea coast requires a powerful Indian navy. India has been supporting the demand of Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace because that is essentially vital for India's security. Presence of United States navy in Diego Garcia in Indian Ocean 1200 kmts from the southern Indian coast since the world war 1st has been largely criticized many times.

India has common land frontiers, at places, with Pakistan, Bangladesh, China, Myanmar (Burma) Nepal and Bhutan. Afghanistan touches northern part of Jammu & Kashmir. Until the Chinese aggression in 1962, the Himalayas were known as the defenders of India. That is no truer more. The air forces of all countries have changed the security perspectives all over the world. Indian vast coastline necessitates not only a powerful navy, but also friendly relations with other naval powers present in the Indian Ocean. These include Britain as well as the United States which have a powerful naval base at Diego Garcia. Although India has been victim of Chinese and Pakistani attacks, it is in their mutual interests that the disputes be peacefully resolved. India has always desired good neighborly relations with all the above mentioned countries, besides, other regional powers such as Iran, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. With this aim in view India's attempt has been to avoid disputes with all the neighbors: and resolve the dispute peacefully in case a dispute does occur.

The presence of Communist China in the north, and till 1991, Socialist USSR also in the neighborhood, made it imperative for India to develop friendly relations with these countries, keep away herself from regional military alliances, yet avoid all conflicts with western countries (like UK and USA) With whom India had historical and strategically important relations, in addition to the common traditions of liberal democracy.⁸ With such type of boundaries India is very much in a position to influence world politics. India's strategic location in South Asia gives her a central position in Asian politics and adds to her geopolitical importance. All the major sea and air routes of the world pass through India, and India is in a sense a connecting link between the geographical areas called West Asia, South-East Asia and the Far East. Any major happening in India would affect the rest of Asia and vice versa.⁹ India is a kind of bridge between the East and the west, as Nehru said, from the geographical point of view, it becomes inevitably involved in major world problems.¹⁰ It was for this reason that India was, in a sense, the bastion of the British Empire, and this is also one of the important reasons why India can play, if she so desires, an important role in contemporary world affairs.

4. Size

After location, size is also an important factor in the process of foreign policy formulation. The size of a states territory is an element of power in itself. Size of a country should be large enough to support a population inhabited within the

territory. At the same time size is only effective when it has all the requirements for a prosperous life for its people, like, land fertility, location, rainfall etc. as Palmer and Perkins wrote:

*Its mere size implies little about its capacity to sustain a large population as witness the Sahara Desert on the one hand and Belgium or Japan on the other. Whether it can be too small to exert effective power depends upon a host of other factors, as far instance, location, fertility, rainfall, the temper of its people, the nature of its technology, and the quality of its leadership.*¹¹

The Factor of size has a great influence in Indian foreign policy: India emerged as the one of the largest state in the world is not without considerable geopolitical significance. In the first place, unless the soil and the sub-soil are unusually barren, a large territory generally means a relatively large stock of natural resources. It is partly for this reason that the Russia and the USA, the two largest states of the world, are also the richest in natural resources: and this fact in turn partly explains why they have been also the only super powers of the world. The same reason makes India as well as China potentially big powers in material terms, which are capable of playing an independent and influential role in world affairs. Secondly, the vastness of India's territory has an importance in terms of security; it would not be easy for any other state to occupy the whole country. One of the important reasons why Napoleon or Hitler could not conquer Russia is the vastness of the latter's territory. The same reason would prevent China or Pakistan from militarily conquering and occupying the whole of India, even if India make the unreal assumption that such a conflict would remain bilateral for a long time. These two important consequences of the bigness of territory make India an important and independent actor in international politics in her own rights. It would not be rational for India, therefore, to behave in international relations like a small state with a small territory, population and resource base.¹²

It seems equally relevant when Jawaharlal Nehru says:

*I can understand some of the smaller countries of Europe or some of the smaller countries of Asia being forced by the circumstances to bow down before some of the greater powers and becoming practically satellites of those powers, because they cannot help it. The power opposed to them is so great and they have nowhere to turn. But I do not think that consideration applies to India.*¹³

5. Conclusion

Technology has brought about unprecedented changes in all the aspects of life. Inventions of new and deadliest technologies of wars like Drone and Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (IBMs) capable of carrying nuclear weapons seems to have changed the meaning of strategic location and traditional connotation of security to a considerable extent. Although, geo-strategic position appears to have become meaningless at the first instance, but air strikes and destructions alone cannot fulfill the purpose

of wars as it is visible in the case of Afghanistan and other countries. The present war strategies adopted by the US led NATO forces in Afghanistan and Pakistan is still dependent on ground battle for a better result and even supply for NATO forces is reliant on road transportation to a large extent on the one hand and air space is also equally important for any communication and subject to agreement with the respective countries as it cannot be used without the approval of the government on the other hand.¹⁴ Whatever the inventions, so far have been taken place are not going to replace the geo-strategic importance of the lands.

The recent international monetary depreciation and latest European economic turmoil are the potential issues to disrupt the world financial structure, in case of India as per recent experiences she has not been much influenced by the problems instead is in a serving position and has recently committed \$10 billion (Rs 56,000 crore) to an International Monetary Fund (IMF) emergency fund likely to be used to help debt-ridden euro zone economies such as Greece¹⁵ after the request made by European Union (EU) seeking help from the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) countries. While announcing the sum said Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in Mexico "India's contribution reflects our recognition that as a responsible player in the global community, we must play our part".¹⁶ According to Tholons research, (a Bangalore based advisory firm) India has become the world leader of outsourcing industry by accounting \$59 billion in 2011 (51% of worlds offshore market share).¹⁷ India-the largest democracy and the one of the fastest developing nations of the world- is having considerable and distinct features of development. From ideas to the practices India is capable of presenting herself as a role model for the world. After all in geographical context, population, climate, natural resources, area, location and industrial capacity are the main agents determining India's secret behind such a progress and its status in international politics.

With the above positive developments there are many threats and challenges for India particularly from the Afghanistan and Pakistan as NATO Chief in Afghanistan warned India recently of a possible threat in coming years due to the concentration of Taliban and Tribals on Pak-Afghan border very close to the Indian Territory. In this context the northern region of India which is Jammu and Kashmir which has been the continuous reason of tension between the India and Pakistan beginning from the partition of Indian subcontinent. Why India is not willing to give up the region at any cost? Perhaps the most important reason is the issue of security of the country as the studies of the documents and the existing situation of that time reveal that security of India was the first consideration while dealing with the territorial distribution immediately after the signing of the independence of India act. V.P. Menon who played an important role in obtaining the accession Kashmir from the maharaja of Kashmir writes:

"Personally when I recommend to the government of India the acceptance of the accession of maharaja of Kashmir, I had in mind one consideration and one consideration alone, viz. that the invasion of Kashmir by the raiders was a great threat to the integrity of India. Ever since the time

*of Mahmud Ghazanawi, that is to say for nearly eight centuries, with but a brief interval during the Mughal epoch, India had been subjected to periodical invasions from the northwest. Mahmud Ghazanawi had led no less than seventeen of these incursions in person. And within less than ten weeks of the establishment of the new state of Pakistan, its very first act was to let loose a tribal invasion through the North West. Srinagar today, Delhi tomorrow. A nation that forget its history or its geography does so at its peril".*¹⁸

Prime Minister Nehru highlights the strategic importance of the region in his speech to the Constituent Assembly in 1947 in the following word:

*"Kashmir because of its geographical position, with its frontiers with three countries, namely, the Soviet Union, China, and Afghanistan, is intimately connected with the security and international contacts of India. Economically also Kashmir is intimately related to India. The caravan trade routes from central Asia to India pass through the Kashmir state".*¹⁹

The second major threat for India is from China as China claims Laddakh to Sikkim as her own territory. These two Asian mighty nations had already fought a war in 1962 on the issue of border between the two countries. The issue of Tibet is a region cultivating international attention today. India has been supporting the cause of Tibetans on autonomy and self determination. India and US relationship has also largely been driven by the China factor to contain the rising threats from the China particularly after the 1962 war between the two Asian giants.

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